

hank willis thomas:  
black righteous space

# hank willis thomas: black righteous space

Over the last decade, the American artist Hank Willis Thomas has become known for powerful works that explore issues of identity, media, race, and popular culture. Often appropriating and recontextualizing common symbols and objects, Thomas's work points to the assumptions and biases that frame our experience of the world.

*Black Righteous Space* is a sound-reactive video installation that explores facets of the black experience and race relations in the United States. Through assembled fragments of speeches, songs, and readings, Thomas presents a raw, unapologetic black history that incorporates both protest and celebration. It features a looping soundtrack that combines songs, speeches, and dialogue from more than fifty noted black leaders, musicians, poets, and celebrities, including Malcolm X, Maya Angelou, Michelle Obama, Angela Davis, Gil Scott-Heron, Tupac Shakur, Dick Gregory, The Staple Singers, Chris Rock, Stokely Carmichael, Nikki Giovanni, Bobby Seale, and Marvin Gaye. As voices of affirmation, dissent, anger, and humor converge, a barrage of patterns flash on the screen, pulsing in time to the rhythm of the voices and music. One such image is a recurrent Confederate flag, recolored in the red, black, and green hues of the Black Power Movement—by which Thomas intentionally confuses and challenges assumptions about the potency of this fraught symbol.

A microphone in the center of the installation beckons visitors to speak or sing during randomized periods of silence, adding their own voices to those of the prominent African-Americans. When these new voices are picked up by the microphone, the flag image shifts into kaleidoscopic patterns that are controlled by sound speakers and the music on the accompanying soundtrack. Thomas uses these new voices to disrupt what he calls “historically oppressive symbols” and to call into question who gets the last word in history, who has the power to decide which symbols and messages propel us forward, and which of those keep us locked in the past.

A powerful tribute to the lengthy struggle for black civil and human rights in the United States, *Black Righteous Space* is a call to action to which all are invited to respond.

Corinna Ripps Schaming  
curator/interim director

## about the artist

Hank Willis Thomas (b. 1976, Plainfield, New Jersey) earned a B.F.A. in photography and Africana studies from New York University, and an M.F.A. and M.A. in photography and visual criticism from the California College of Arts. He has also received honorary doctorates from the Maryland Institute of Art and the Institute for Doctoral Studies in the Visual Arts. His work has been exhibited throughout the U.S. and abroad, including at the International Center of Photography, Guggenheim Museum Bilbao, Musée du quai Branly, and the Cleveland Museum of Art. Thomas's works are in numerous public collections, among them the Museum of Modern Art, the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Brooklyn Museum, the High Museum of Art, and the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. His collaborative projects include *Question Bridge: Black Males, In Search of the Truth (The Truth Booth)*, and *For Freedoms*, which Thomas co-founded in 2016 as the first artist-run super-PAC. *For Freedoms* was recently awarded the 2017 ICP Infinity Award for New Media and Online Platform, and Thomas is also the recipient of the 2017 Soros Equality Fellowship.

Thomas's current and upcoming exhibitions include *Prospect 4: The Lotus in Spite of the Swamp* in New Orleans and *Freedom Isn't Always Beautiful* at Savannah College of Art and Design Museum in Georgia. A member of the Public Design Commission for the City of New York, he lives and works in New York City.

## playlist

**Curtis Mayfield** (b. 1942, d. 1999), "We're A Winner" and "Mighty Mighty"

A singer-songwriter, guitarist and record producer considered to be one of the most influential musicians behind soul and politically conscious African-American music.

**Eugene Blacknell** (d. 1980s), "We Know We Have To Live Together (Beck's "Black Tamberine" Original Sample)

An activist, singer and guitarist who released multiple singles that ranged in style from raw R&B to power house funk.

**Dick Gregory** (b. 1932, d. 2017), "Black Power, Brown Strength & the White Tornado"

A comedian, civil rights activist and social critic who became a pioneer in stand-up comedy for his "no-holds-barred" sets, in which he mocked bigotry and racism. Post segregation, he became the first black comedian to cross over to white audiences.

**George Soule** (b. 1945), "Get Involved"

A singer-songwriter, drummer, record producer and studio engineer whose songs have been recorded by some of the most successful artists in soul music, including The Temptations and Bobby Womack. In 1973, he had a Top 40 rhythm and blues hit titled "Get Involved".

**The Lumpen** (active 1970-71), "Free Bobby Now – Seize The Time"

The official band of the Black Panther Party who played hits of the time but changed the lyrics to express the revolutionary message of the party.

**Viola Davis** (b. 1965), "2017 Emmy Award Speech"

An actress and producer. She is the first black woman to be nominated for three Academy Awards, winning one, and the only black actor to achieve the Triple Crown of Acting.

**O' Jays** (active 1958 - present), "Give The People What They Want"

A R&B group from Ohio formed in 1958 and inducted into the Vocal Group Hall of Fame in 2004.

**Staple Singers** (active 1948-94), "Brand New Day"

A gospel, soul and R&B group known for the 1970's hits "Respect Yourself", "I'll Take You There" and "Let's Do It Again".

**The Black Panther Party** (active 1966-82), "Sample of Black Panther chants from 1968" and "10-Point Program Speech"

The most influential black movement organization of the 1960's whose core practice was to challenge police brutality by monitoring the behavior of police officers.

**Chris Rock** (b. 1965), "Oscars Opening Monologue"

A comedian, writer, producer and director who hosted the 88<sup>th</sup> Academy Awards in 2016. When the acting nominations turned out to include no racial minorities, Rock was called upon to join a boycott of the ceremony. Instead, Rock declined and spoke of his concerns about the lack of diversity in Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences at various times during the show, closing by saying "Black Lives Matter."

**Camille Yarbrough** (b. 1938), "All Hid"

A musician, writer, television producer and activist. Of Yarbrough and her work, activist Kevin Powell writes, "...Yarbrough has stylish traces of Nina Simone and Gil Scott-Heron but her own style of singing and recitation ... are outstanding. Her songs are all thought provoking."

**Stokely Carmichael** (b. 1941, d. 1998), "Powerful Speech"

A prominent figure in the Civil Rights Movement and global Pan-African Movement as the leader of the Student Nonviolent Coordination Committee, honorary prime minister of the Black Panther Party, and leader of the All African Peoples Revolutionary Party.

**Chi-Lites** (active 1959-present), "Give More Power To The People!!"

A R&B/soul vocal quartet from Chicago whose greatest fame came during the early 1970s.

**Marvin Gaye** (b. 1939, d. 1989), "Inner City Blues (Make Me Wanna Holler)"

A singer-songwriter and record producer who shaped the sound of Motown in the 1960s.

**Del Jones**, (*dates unknown*), "Times Are Hard Friends Are Few"  
An author and journalist known for works such as "The Black Holocaust: Global Genocide" and "Culture Bandits" which challenge common beliefs of American history and the American music industry.

**Immortal Technique** (*b. 1978*), "Modern Day Slavery"  
A hip-hop recording artist and activist whose lyrics often comment on controversial issues such as socialism, religion, imperialism and institutional racism.

**Watts Prophets** (*active 1967-present*), "Hello Niggers"  
A trio of musicians and poets often considered as a forerunner of contemporary hip-hop music.

**Nikki Giovanni** (*b. 1943*), "The Great Pax Whitie (Peace Be Still)"  
A member of the Black Arts Movement, an artistic outgrowth of the Black Power Movement. It is often argued as the movement that produced some of the most exciting poetry, drama, music, and visual art of post WWII United States, in which many "post Black artists" such as Toni Morrison, Ntozake Shange, Alice Walker and August Wilson were shaped.

**Grady Tate** (*b. 1932, d. 2017*), "Be Black Baby"  
A hard bop and soul-jazz drummer and singer with a distinctive baritone voice who notably lent his voice to a number of the songs animated in the "Schoolhouse Rock!" series.

**Elaine Brown** (*b. 1943*), "Assassination"  
A prison activist, writer and former Black Panther Party chairwoman who briefly ran for the Green Party presidential nomination in 2008.

**Syl Johnson** (*b. 1936*), "I'm Talkin' Bout Freedom"  
A blues and soul singer and record producer. Like his contemporaries, he wrote songs exploring themes of African American identity and social problems, such as "Is It Because I'm Black", which reached number 11 on the Billboard R&B chart in 1969.

**Larry Williams** (*b. 1935, d. 1980*), "Wake Up"  
A rhythm & blues singer-songwriter, pianist and producer from New Orleans, Louisiana and longtime friend of singer Little Richard.

**Barack Obama** (*b. 1961*), "Anger Translator"  
A politician who served as the 44<sup>th</sup> president of the United States from 2009 to 2017 and the first African American to assume the presidency.

**Maya Angelou** (*b. 1928, d. 2014*), "And Still I Rise"  
A poet, memoirist and civil rights activist whose works "I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings" and "And Still I Rise" are considered a celebration of black culture and womanhood.

**Fred Hampton** (*b. 1948, d. 1969*), "You Can Jail A Revolutionary, But You Can't Jail A Revolution" Speech  
An activist and chairman of the Illinois chapter of the Black Panther Party who was killed during a raid by a tactical unit of the Cook County, Illinois State Attorney's Office.

**Gil Scott-Heron** (*b. 1949, d. 2011*), "Brother", "Whitey On the Moon", "Winter in America (1974)" and "The Revolution Will Not be Televised"  
A soul and jazz poet, musician and spoken word performer who received critical acclaim, especially after the release of his best-known composition, "The Revolution Will Not Be Televised".

**Kathleen Cleaver** (*b. 1945*), "Black is Beautiful"  
A professor of law at Emory University School of Law known for her involvement in the Black Panther Party.

**Jesse Williams** (*b. 1981*), "Speech"  
An actor and activist who's a member of the board of directors at The Advancement Project, a civil rights think tank and advocacy group and the executive producer of *Question Bridge*, a multifaceted media project focused on black male identity and diversity within the demographic.

**Paris** (*b. 1967*), "Panther Power"  
A rapper known for his highly charged political and socially conscious lyrics and former member of the Nation of Islam.

**Sons Of Slum** (*active*), "What Goes Around (Must Come Around)"

**Eldridge Cleaver** (*b. 1935, d. 1998*), "The Definition of 'Pigs' Excerpt Speech"  
A writer and political activist who became an early leader of the Black Panther Party.

**Harold Melvin & the Blue Notes** (*active 1954-96*), "Wake Up Everybody"  
A R&B/Soul vocal group and one of the most popular Philadelphia soul groups of the 1970s.

**Michelle Obama** (*b. 1946*), "2016 DNC Speech"  
A lawyer and writer who was First Lady of the United States from 2009 to 2017. Obama became a role model for women, an advocate for poverty awareness, education and nutrition as well as a fashion icon.

**Ghetto Kitty** (*active*), "Stand Up And Be Counted"

**Last Poets** (*active 1968-present*), "Panther"  
Several groups of poets and musicians who arose from the Civil Rights Movement's Black Nationalist movement. The Last Poets are credited as one of the earliest influences on hip-hop music.

**Malcolm X** (*b. 1925, d. 1965*), "Speech on America"  
An American Muslim minister and human rights activist who became the public face of the Nation of Islam in 1952. He later repudiated the NOI but continued to promote Pan-Africanism and black self-determination.

**Porsha O**, (*dates unknown*), "Rekia Boyd"  
A poet and spoken word performer whose work focuses on the injustice of violence against black women and girls and how it's too often ignored.

**Max Roach** (*b. 1924, d. 2007*), "Driva Man"  
A pioneer of bebop and jazz drummer and composer who is generally considered one of the most important drummers in history.

**Sam Dees** (*b. 1945*), "Heritage Of A Black Man"  
A soul singer, songwriter and record producer.

**Clifford Thornton** (*b. 1936, d. 1989*), "Huey is Free"  
A jazz trumpeter, trombonist, activist and educator who performed free and avant-garde jazz in the 1960s and 70s.

**Sly and The Family Stone** (*active 1966-83*), "Don't Call Me Nigger, Whitey"  
A band pivotal in the development of funk, soul, rock and psychedelic music and the first major American rock group to have a racially integrated, male and female, lineup.

**Bobby Seale** (*b. 1936*), "Speech"  
A political activist and co-founder of the Black Panther Party.

**Tupac Shakur** (*b. 1971, d. 1996*), "Nothing Can Stop You" speech and "Spark The Brain"  
A rapper, poet, actor and activist who sold over 75 million records worldwide making him one of the best selling music artists of all time. His mother, Afeni Shakur, was a member of the Black Panther Party.

**Angela Davis** (*b. 1944*), "Black Power Mixtape"  
A political activist and author who emerged as a prominent counterculture activist in the 1960s when she led the Communist Party USA.

**Amiri Baraka** (*b. 1939, d. 2014*), "Black Art"  
A member of the Black Arts Movement, an artistic outgrowth of the Black Power Movement. It is often argued as the movement that produced some of the most exciting poetry, drama, music, and visual art of post WWII United States; in which many "post Black artists" such as Toni Morrison, Ntozake Shange, Alice Walker, and August Wilson were shaped.

**Darondo** (*b. 1946, d. 2013*), "Let My People Go"  
A funk and soul singer from the San Francisco Bay area.

**Billy Paul** (*b. 1934, d. 2016*), "Am I Black Enough For You"  
A Grammy award winning soul singer associated with the Philadelphia soul sound. Questlove and the Roots equated Paul to Marvin Gaye and Stevie Wonder, calling him "one of the criminally unmentioned proprietors of socially conscious post revolution 60s civil rights music."

**Watts 103rd St. Rhythm Band** (*active 1962-present*) "Express Yourself"  
A soul and funk band best known for their hit, "Express Yourself", which peaked at number 3 on the Billboard R&B chart and number 12 on the Billboard Pop chart.